

## Big Boys Do Fly II - Close Encounter

by Wendymr

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Summary: In this sequel to Big Boys Do Fly, Conor and Laura have some unexpected visitors

### Big Boys Do Fly II - Close Encounter

This story is a sequel to my recent Elseworld fic, Big Boys Do Fly, and may not make sense if you haven't read BBDF. As with BBDF, I have to acknowledge - and thank - Margaret and Debby for the inspiration which I've drawn from their superb 'Swap-Meet'. Again, the story is different, but elements of the premise are similar, and I have had to resist the temptation to use some incidents from 'Swap-Meet' which would have made perfect sense in the context of this story! Margaret, Debby, if we ever met I'd buy you a drink or two for that great story and the idea it gave me for this sequel, but as it's unlikely... let's just say I'm sending you lots of cyber-gratitude. Thanks also to Karen Ward for her enthusiasm about BBDF, which gave me the encouragement I needed to start this sequel, and for her very helpful and encouraging beta-editing of the sequel (yes, it's all her fault, guys < g>).

Again, some of the characters in this story belong to DC Comics and Warner Bros, and no infringement of copyright is intended. The characters of Conor and Laura are my invention, albeit closely based on some rather more familiar characters < g>

Feedback, as ever, welcomed, even if it is to tell me never to revisit this version of the Superman mythos ever again!

Wendy.

[w.m.richards@fullerdr.demon.co.uk](mailto:w.m.richards@fullerdr.demon.co.uk)

Big Boys Do Fly II - Close Encounter

- Santa Monica, California, an Alternate Universe -

Conor Kane threw down the newspaper he had been reading and shot a

quirky smile at his fiancée. "I see the Press is still milking our former TV roles for all they're worth."

Laura grinned. "What do you expect? After all, 'Lois and Clark' is still showing on TV - it's hardly surprising they'd run a headline like 'TV SUPERMAN TO MARRY HIS LOIS.'"

"I guess so," Conor agreed ruefully. "I'd just rather not be so publicly associated with Superman - I guess now I know how the real Clark Kent feels!"

Laura moved to wrap her arms around her fiancé. "Yeah, I suppose so. You know, I really wish there was some way we could meet him and Lois - find out how they cope with all this stuff, you know?"

Conor rested his cheek against Laura's as he held her closely against him. The month since he had discovered his super-powers and HG Wells had appeared to tell him that he was in reality Superman had been a very difficult time for the two of them. Some things had been easy, such as getting out of their contracts for 'Lois and Clark': they had simply got their agents to contact the studios the day after the near-accident, that momentous day which neither of them would ever forget, to state that the two stars considered that the working conditions were unsafe and so they felt justified in withdrawing from the show. The Powers-that-Be had tried for about a week to change their minds, but by then the real Superman had made several appearances around Los Angeles and its environs, and as Conor had predicted, XYZ got a little nervous about viewing figures for its fake Superman. He had helped things along, as Superman, by hinting to one or two journalists that he wasn't entirely happy about the existence of a TV show depicting a fictional version of himself.

There had been another little hiccup, however, when Marner Sisters had threatened a lawsuit against Superman for infringement of copyright. They had claimed that the Super-hero was using a name, colours and a symbol to which they owned the rights. Conor hadn't initially known how to get around that one, but then Laura had suggested that they investigate who held the rights in the original book which Wells had told them that he had caused to be published. It had turned out that all rights in the Superman story belonged to a charity called the Superman Foundation, and that Marner's had only leased the rights for the particular purpose of the TV show called 'Lois and Clark.' The Superman Foundation, it turned out, had been practically defunct for several years, but Conor - with his knowledge and understanding of TV-land and the way in which people often tried to make a fast buck - ensured that a manager was put in place in order to ensure that Superman's image was protected in future, and that any licensing was for good causes.

That had been easy; learning to control his powers was not. There had now been several times when Conor had used just too much strength, or hadn't controlled his heat vision adequately, and had as a result caused damage to property or some harm to people as a result. So far, he acknowledged, no-one had been seriously hurt, but he was aware that unless he got this problem sorted out quickly his luck might not continue. Even worse had been the night he had misjudged his strength when making love with Laura, and her golden skin had been covered in bruises the following day as a result. She had assured him that she was fine, that she understood and that he hadn't really hurt her; but

he knew she was lying to protect his feelings, and he hated it.

At least some things had worked out well since, though, he acknowledged. He had been very happy to leave the show; somehow, although he'd generally thought the series very good, with above-average scripts, there were some aspects of the job he wouldn't miss at all. And now he was working full-time as a writer - well, as full-time as he could given his new sideline as Super-hero. He had already had a script commissioned for a new drama serial, and he was also working on a script for a movie. And, if he ever got a few minutes free, he wanted to write a book.

Laura had also had plenty of opportunities once it was known she was no longer under contract to Marner's; the year or so with 'Lois and Clark' had turned her into one of Hollywood's hot properties. She had decided to accept a role in a movie which - Conor was glad to hear - was being shot entirely in and around Los Angeles, and just before she had got into rehearsals for that they had moved her things into his house. Together, they worked out ways to maintain his secret identity and prevent Superman from taking over too much of their lives.

"I tell ya, I sure wish we had Martha Kent in this world as well," Conor added now in response to Laura. "That suit the real Clark sent me is beginning to look a little worn.... I wish I knew how he manages!"

"I guess he has several," Laura agreed. "If our portrayal was in any way accurate..."

Conor grinned. "Yeah, the secret compartment... I'm still trying to figure out how to build one here. For now, I just have to hope we can keep the Suit hidden." He sighed. "Of course, he has it easier in other ways too - Metropolis is definitely *\*not\** Southern California! There's no way I can wear the Suit under my clothes - everyone would wonder why my arms and legs were all covered up." He had actually devised a means of folding the Super-Suit up into a very small size, and carrying it in a pocket; he had rehearsed countless times until he could execute a spin-change from normal clothes to Superman in something under a tenth of a second. Still, the constant folding and unfolding no doubt helped to explain the sorry state of the Suit.

He bent to kiss Laura again, but stopped abruptly as his attention was distracted by screams of "Help!" Regretfully, he released her and said apologetically, "Someone's in trouble - over in Burbank by the sound of it. I won't be long."

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- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

Clark Kent, who had been busily engaged making love to his wife, suddenly sat up, his attention focused on something Lois was unable to see or hear.

"What it is, honey - someone in trouble?" she asked, disappointment obvious in her voice.

He turned back to her. "No - there was a noise here, in the house."

"You sure it wasn't Jon?" she asked, referring to their one-year-old son, asleep in the next room. He raised an eyebrow at her, shaking his head; she acknowledged his reaction with a grimace. Of \*course\* Clark would know if it was Jon.

"So - what is it then?" she asked. In answer her husband silently levitated out of the bed and stared hard at the floor; looking through it to the floor below, Lois knew. When he straightened and turned his face back to hers she was taken aback at the wary expression on his.

"Lois... I think you'd better get dressed and come downstairs with me."

She stared at him. "Why? What's going on?"

He sighed heavily in response. "It's HG Wells."

"Oh boy..."

\*\*\*\*\*

"So, what's the problem this time, Mr Wells?" Lois asked, a little tersely, but she considered that this was understandable given that on at least one occasion on which the writer and time-traveller had visited them his news hadn't really been anything they wanted to hear.

"Is it Tempus again?" Clark demanded, inwardly cringing at the thought. He hated the meddler from the future with a vengeance; although he was not a violent man, on the occasion when he and Lois had last come into contact with Tempus he had almost abandoned his ethics entirely. Of course, Clark considered, that \*had\* been understandable, given that among other misdeeds too numerous to mention Tempus had exercised his mind-control device on Lois and almost made her drive off a cliff to her death.

But Wells immediately put their minds at rest. "No, no, Mr Kent, not this time, I assure you. But someone does need your help - two people actually. And Miss Lane's as well, if you would both agree to come."

"Come where?" Lois interjected, none too pleased at the lack of information. "Mr Wells, we don't want to be awkward, but we can't just go charging off with you at a moment's notice any more - we have responsibilities now!"

"Ah yes, little Master Jonathan, isn't it?" Wells replied. "My congratulations, by the way."

Clark inclined his head. "Thank you. But Lois is right - we can't leave our son."

"Mr Kent, you know that I can bring you back here at the precise moment at which I took you away," Wells pointed out.

But Lois shook her head adamantly. "We won't take that chance."

Clark sighed heavily, suspecting that their uninvited guest had no intention of giving up. "Mr Wells, why don't you tell us what this is all about?" He gestured towards the sofa, not seeing any point in all of them standing in the centre of the living-room.

Once the three of them were seated, Wells clearly felt that it was time to explain. He twiddled his bow-tie for a moment or two, then began, "Mr Kent, your alternate counterpart needs your help - his fiancée yours, Miss Lane."

Clark stiffened. The Clark from the alternate universe? Although he had liked his 'twin' - his namesake, his other self - when they had finally met, he hadn't been able to rid his mind of the memory that this man had spent several days with Lois on the two occasions on which they had met. And Clark had seen the expression in the other man's eyes when he'd looked at Lois: admiration, desire, love... and desperate need. And the man looked *exactly* like him, for God's sake! He couldn't have blamed Lois if she'd... though he knew she hadn't. Wouldn't. And he suspected that, if the other Clark was in any way like himself, he would have far too much of a sense of honour and duty to try anything on with Lois. Which only served to make Clark feel guilty about his feelings of jealousy.

"The other Clark?" Lois asked, her voice betraying her concern. "Is he all right? Fiancée - does that mean he's found *his* Lois?"

Clark closed his eyes briefly. Yes, he was being very childish and unreasonable. And if his counterpart needed his help - well, he was honour bound to provide it. He would *willingly* provide it; after all, the other Clark had come here, to this Metropolis, to help save this world from Tempus after he himself had been banished to infinity.

But Wells surprised them. "No, not that Clark - although yes, indeed, he has found the Lois of his world. They are not engaged, although they are becoming... close friends, I understand." He paused. "But I believe I can tell you all about that some other time. No, the person who needs your help is the Superman I told you about some weeks ago, Mr Kent."

Clark remembered. "You said he was an *actor* - and that you needed to prompt him to become Superman..." He paused, glancing at Lois. "I think I told you... I gave Mr Wells one of my Suits for him." He turned his attention back to the time-traveller. "But you didn't explain it all very well then - what I couldn't figure out is if he *is* me, why he's an actor, and why his name isn't Clark Kent...." He frowned. "What was it - Conan...?"

"Conor, Mr Kent. Conor Kane. As to why his life has not run along the same path as yours, that can be explained on our way there. The problem now is that he has rather been thrown in at the deep end, and he is having some difficulty in adjusting to his Super-powers, and the role of Super-hero." Wells then turned to Lois. "His fiancée, Laura Lindsay, is in fact your counterpart, Miss Lane, and she was not at all expecting to find herself engaged to a Super-hero. As I believe you may be in a position to understand, she is also finding the adjustment a touch... difficult."

Lois glanced at Clark. Wells was right; perhaps more so than Clark himself would ever realise. She had - once she had managed to rid herself of her Superman fantasy - fallen very hard for Clark Kent. The ordinary, caring, thoughtful reporter from Kansas. The occasionally clumsy guy who couldn't even open a peanut butter jar. The shy, not altogether self-assured man who had a strange habit of disappearing at the first sign of trouble. And whose kisses, she had been amazed to discover, could drive her to the point of distraction.

It had been one \*hell\* of a shock to discover that, in taking on Clark Kent, she was actually also taking on Superman.

She had had a lot of preconceptions to overcome; a lot of expectations to discard. It had never before occurred to her to wonder what Superman did when he wasn't out saving people or dropping by to talk to her. Learning to understand Clark in his everyday routines had been quite a task. Although he had been brought up by ordinary humans, and was well used to disguising his abilities, he had certain routines involving his Super-powers; she remembered, for instance, walking into his bathroom one morning, not knowing he was there, and catching him shaving using his super-vision. But more traumatic than simply getting used to such everyday habits had been understanding, and learning to soothe him, when he arrived home devastated by some disaster or other he'd been helping with. The times when he had not been quite fast enough, or when he just couldn't save everyone... those were times when the Man of Steel's soft heart was all but crushed. And there was little she could do on such occasions, other than listen, and hold him close.

And she in fact did understand how he felt at such times, thanks to the few days when she had possessed his powers for herself. There had been things she had enjoyed about her time as Ultra Woman, but the pain and anguish of discovering just how it hurt to get there that split second too late... She had been grateful for \*his\* understanding on those occasions, and had been only too happy to give up the powers and the role.

Yes, she understood how it felt to be the partner of a Superman.

She reached out to touch Clark's arm. "Honey, I think we should go."

Clark turned, smiling down at her. He had reached the same conclusion, while thinking about how it had felt to be \*different\*, as he had while he'd been growing up. The constant need to pretend, to hide his powers, to 'help' in secret; it had been very hard. And, from what little Wells had told him about this... Conor?... it sounded as if he hadn't had the stalwart support of Jonathan and Martha Kent. Clark flinched as he wondered what his life would have been like without them. He knew, already, the effect it had had upon the other Clark: \*he\* had been diffident, self-effacing, awkward, forever trying to hide himself. He hadn't, according to Lois, possessed \*her\* Clark's air of self-deprecating humour or the quiet confidence he had gradually developed the longer he had been in Metropolis.

Whatever this Conor and his fiancée were going through, it was obvious that he and Lois could help - and it was very clear to Clark

that they should do so. He stood up.

"Yes, I agree. All right, Mr Wells, but you'll have to wait while I make arrangements for our son."

"Clark?" Lois reached for his hand. "What arrangements?"

He bent and kissed her swiftly,. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll take him to Mom and Dad - they won't mind, and you know they'll take good care of him."

"Okay, honey, that sounds...good." She trailed off, a sonic boom telling her that Clark was already half-way to Smallville with Jon. Lois turned apologetically to Wells, who smiled understandingly at her.

"So - tell me a little more about... Conor and Laura, isn't it?"

HG Wells nodded. "Yes, indeed. Well, what is most... interesting, and possibly ironic, about their situation is that, until a month ago, they actually *\*played\** you and your husband on TV."

"What?" Lois jumped to her feet in incredulity. "What do you mean - on TV?"

"Well, you see, in their world Superman was actually thought to be a fictional character, and a television company built a TV series around him. And, I should warn you, the show is called 'Lois and Clark'.

"What? You mean that people in that world know that Clark is Superman?"

"Yes, indeed - but, Miss Lane, that shouldn't bother you too much. As you well know, in the Alternate Metropolis everyone knows that the other Clark is Superman."

Lois sighed; what Wells said was certainly true. "Yes," she agreed, "but *\*my\** Clark isn't used to everyone knowing his secret."

"But, Miss Lane, there is no need for everyone to know who you are," Wells explained. "Mr Kane lives in quite a large house, in a secluded suburb of Santa Monica, near the beach, and so your presence may well go undetected. And since both Mr Kane and Miss Lindsay are actors, I am sure they would be able to assist you and Mr Kent with disguises should you need to venture outside."

Lois grunted, thinking that this was beginning to sound as if they would be virtual prisoners in Conor Kane's house. And *\*actors\** - she and Clark had interviewed a number of actors in their time, and had rarely been impressed with the breed. As a general rule, she considered, actors were vain, superficial, and interested in little beyond themselves and their own publicity. Sure, this Conor and Laura might *\*look\** like Clark and herself, but they were unlikely to be particularly alike in personality.

Seeking further clarification, she turned back to Wells. "You said up until about a month ago...?"

"Ah, yes, precisely," the time-traveller answered. "They both managed

to extricate themselves from their contracts with the TV studios which made the programme. Since then, I understand that Mr Kane has been concentrating on writing... I think you will find that in this respect he is not too dissimilar to your husband."

"Writing?" Clark enquired curiously as a blur of red and blue appeared, together with a gust of wind, in the living-room and swiftly coalesced into Superman.

"Yes. He is writing scripts and screenplays at the moment, but I understand that he is also keen to try fiction - books, perhaps."

"Is Jon all right with Martha?" Lois asked her husband anxiously. Clark reassured her, before turning to Wells and suggesting that they were ready to leave.

Wells hesitated. "There is one further thing, Mr Kent... Superman, if you wouldn't mind. Ah... I understand that Mr Kane has not yet worked out a method of getting his suits made, and the one I gave him when I visited previously is... a little the worse for wear by now."

Clark grimaced. "I guess I can spare him a couple. I'll just have to be very nice to Mom and ask her to sew up a few more when she has time."

Lois patted his arm. "Well, you know she says that new fabric STAR Labs came up with is very easy to work with."

Clark hurried upstairs, quickly returning with a gym bag, and as he removed three suits from the hidden compartment and placed them in the bag he explained to Lois that he had packed them a few things. "After all, we don't know how long we'll be there."

Shortly afterwards, they were in the interdimensional transport; it whirled into life and the familiar surroundings of their living-room shimmered and disappeared.

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- Santa Monica, California, An Alternate Universe -

Lois glanced around curiously as the three emerged from the large garage attached to an even larger house. "I see what you mean about this being a big place, HG - the grounds alone are big enough for several apartment blocks!"

"Well, honey, this is the kind of place actors can afford - and they usually need it in order to get any privacy," Clark mused in a faintly sardonic tone. He was now beginning to feel a little unsure about meeting this world's strange incarnation of himself. And the thought that the man had actually \*played\* him, Clark Kent, on TV... it hardly bore thinking about.

"I bet she won't look a bit like me," Lois observed tartly as she continued to survey the grounds.

Clark shrugged. "What do we do - just go and knock at the door?"



Wells answered. "Yes, indeed, that would be a good idea - but first, something else you should know. It... ah, may well be that helping Mr Kane and Miss Lindsay to understand super-powers is not all you will need to do while you are here."

Lois turned to glare at Wells. "So what else is going on here that you \*haven't\* told us about? And why have you brought us here under false pretences?"

"I assure you that there are no false pretences, Miss Lane. I simply felt that I should warn you that it is possible that... other unforeseen dangers may arise."

Clark eyed the time-traveller suspiciously. "And I suppose that's all you're going to tell us?"

"Ah... quite so, Mr Kent," Wells replied, a little nervously. Lois's lips twitched slightly despite herself: the sound of Clark using his sternest Superman voice did tend to have that effect on people.

But before they could ask any further questions, Wells announced his intention of leaving, and hurried back towards the time machine. Lois glared at him, urging Clark to stop him. Clark, however, just shrugged. "What do you want me to do to him, Lois? Fly him up over Santa Monica Harbour and threaten to drop him in the ocean if he doesn't tell us?"

Lois shrugged. "Well... it could have worked."

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"Conor? What is it?" Laura had noticed that Conor's attention was no longer on either herself, or on the freshly-baked croissants he had brought back from Paris only fifteen minutes earlier.

Conor frowned. "There are some people out front - I can hear their voices, but not what they're saying."

Laura's eyebrows rose. "Persistent autograph-hunters?"

"Unlikely." Conor began to pace around the large, airy kitchen. "The gates should still be locked, so I can't think how anyone would get in." He headed for the door leading to the hall. "I'm going to check it out."

Laura followed him as he strode towards the front door and flung it open, ready to challenge the intruders. However, she then collided with his rigid back as he stopped dead.

"My God... who the hell are you?"

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Clark nudged Lois and, once he had her attention, murmured, "I think we're about to meet our hosts."

She gave him a questioning glance; he lightly touched his ear-lobe. Taking Lois's arm, he walked purposefully up the pathway leading to the Colonial-style front door. As they reached the door, it was flung open.

Even though Clark had been expecting to meet his double - or at least near-double - it was still hard not to gasp. The man holding the door open was his own height, with identical hair and eye colour, the same faintly Asian skin tone, the same build. The only differences were that this man wore no glasses, and his hair had no styling gel, instead worn flopping loosely over his forehead. It was also a little longer than Clark's.

However, Conor Kane certainly hadn't been expecting to see Clark Kent and Lois Lane: after his first shocked exclamation, he then proceeded to accuse them of being doubles from a theatrical agency, sent over by some supermarket tabloid. He demanded to know who was paying them, and threatened to call the police if they didn't leave.

Lois was not impressed by this; she stepped forward and poked Conor emphatically in the chest. "We are *\*not\** actors, or 'star doubles' or whatever else you called us. I am Lois Lane and this is Clark Kent. And if you don't believe me..." she rummaged in her purse, "here's my Press pass."

Stepping out from behind Conor, Laura reached out to take the stiff card. Now it was Clark's turn to look surprised. "Looks like you lost, Lois - hair style aside, she's *\*exactly\** like you!"

Lois turned her attention to the younger woman; her hair was in the same shoulder-length style Lois had worn until four years earlier. Other than that, Clark was right: it was like looking in a mirror.

Laura turned to Conor, showing him the Press pass. "Either this is real, or someone's gone to a lot of trouble to forge it."

"How can it be real?" Conor's tone was sceptical. "This is ridiculous - Lois Lane doesn't exist."

"In this world," Laura completed softly, so quietly that - she thought - only Conor could hear her. But she was completely taken aback to hear the male stranger repeat her words back to her.

"You're right, Miss Lindsay, not in this world." Clark inhaled deeply, then glanced around cautiously. "Perhaps this will persuade you." He allowed himself to levitate a foot or so off the ground. "Proof enough for you, Mr Kane - or should I say, Superman?"

Conor stared. Then, suddenly recalling the fact that they were standing outside his front door - and although he *\*thought\** his grounds were pretty secure and safe from prying eyes, he didn't want to take the chance - he stood aside. "Perhaps you'd better come in."

"Good idea," Lois replied tartly. "Apart from anything else, it's hot out here - I hope you have air conditioning?"

"Naturally," Conor replied, taken aback at his visitor's forthrightness. He led the group into his spacious living-room, Lois's heels clicking on the polished wooden floor as the small group followed him. He closed the double doors, shutting them in as if that somehow ensured still further the confidential nature of this

meeting, and then turned to his guests.

"Okay. You obviously already know that I'm Conor Kane and this is Laura Lindsay. But..." he paused, wondering how to phrase this, "how \*can\* you be Clark Kent and Lois Lane?"

Laura answered for him. "Looks like that strange Mr Wells has been here again."

Lois glanced at her counterpart; perhaps this woman wasn't quite the dumb brunette she had taken her for. But then again, Lois reminded herself, Laura was supposed to be \*her\* - but Lois's difficulty was that she could never imagine herself doing anything so trivial as becoming an actor, in any universe.

Clark nodded. "Yes, that's exactly it. He came to visit us last night, and told us that you two needed help adjusting to..." He gestured with his hands. "Everything that's happened to you in the last few weeks."

Laura shook her head. "This is \*so\* weird. It's only a few days since I said to Conor that I really wished we could meet you two, talk to you."

Clark shrugged faintly. "Well, that's what we're here for." He strode towards Laura, his hand outstretched. "I'm Clark."

"Laura."

Conor took Clark's hand, surreptitiously testing his grip for strength. Clark returned pressure for pressure, and after a few moments Conor released his grasp. "Okay, Clark Kent - Superman - it's good to meet you."

Lois advanced to stand proprietorially beside her husband, and offered her hand to the man who looked so like him. "Hi Conor - I'm Lois."

"Yeah," Conor replied softly. "I'm sorry I accused you guys of being from a tabloid. It was just one hell of a shock, okay?"

Laura took charge. "Can I get you guys a drink - orange juice? Coffee? There's still some croissants left from breakfast...."

"Won't take me five minutes to get more anyway," Conor added.

Clark raised an eyebrow at him. "Paris?"

"Yeah - Faubourg St Antoine," Conor explained.

Clark grinned. "Busted - I go there too." Conor was by now recovering from his initial shock. "Mr Wells told us you two really existed in another universe - I don't think we really believed him though," he explained, his tone still faintly incredulous. Then, remembering, he added, "But you gave him that suit for me, Clark - I want to thank you for that."

Clark, who was eyeing with interest the croissants and muffins Laura was carrying in, replied, a little absently, "No problem. I brought

you a couple more, but you'll need to figure out a way of getting your own made."

"We should - or rather, Superman should talk to a theatrical costumier," Laura suggested as she passed around coffee.

Lois had been silently observing the interaction between her husband and his counterpart, while at the same time she was forming her own, not entirely favourable, impressions about this show-business couple by the expensively-furnished large house they shared. She then watched in amazement as Conor helped himself to three lumps of sugar in his espresso, then disposed of a large triple chocolate muffin in under three seconds. "He's worse than you, Clark!" she exclaimed.

Laura met Lois's glance with a raised eyebrow. "Conor's eating habits have become far worse since he discovered he's Superman. He always did eat a lot of junk food, but lately he just wolfs it down so fast I barely see him do it."

"Yeah, just like Clark," Lois agreed wryly.

"Hey, we are here, y'know," Conor pointed out, exchanging long-suffering glances with Clark.

Lois ignored him, continuing, "It's weird, though - the other Clark hated junk food."

"\*Other\* Clark?" Conor sounded extremely confused.

"Yeah - from yet another alternate universe," Clark explained. "Lois has met him twice - she got taken there by Tempus once, and another time HG Wells brought him to help out in our world when I was trapped in infinity." Seeing his hosts' bewildered expressions, he added, "Never mind about that - anyway, we have no idea how many other universes there are, but from what we've found out so far it looks as if there are versions of us in all of them."

Laura came to sit by Conor on one of the large, deep sofas, and he acknowledged her presence by sliding his hand along her jaw and into her hair. Lois gasped and stared at Clark: that was his special caress, the gesture which meant so much to both of them. If everything else had not already done so, this convinced her that these two were indeed hers and Clark's counterparts.

Clark's thoughts had started to move in a more practical direction, and he addressed his question to Conor. "How do you manage not to be recognised? You don't wear glasses as a disguise, like I do, and you've even been publicly associated with Superman through your TV show."

Conor frowned. "So far it hasn't been a problem, though I'm not quite sure why. I guess no-one thinks 'Conor Kane the Hollywood star' could possibly be Superman."

"Though you do look very different in the new suit," Laura commented, smiling fondly at her fiancé. "The first time you wore it I thought you looked nothing like you do on TV."

"You should be able to help Conor out there, Clark - you could appear

somewhere as Superman and be seen with him."

Clark raised an eyebrow in his wife's direction. "Like the other Clark did for us, you mean? I guess so, if we can find a suitable opportunity."

"This is just so weird," Conor said slowly; although he had been participating in the conversation, he realised that he still felt almost as if this was a dream. "I'm kind of alternating between feeling really, really honoured to meet you two, and feeling like I've been cloned."

Clark rolled his eyes. "Oh, we know what *\*that's\** like!"

Laura met Clark's gaze. "Oh yeah, of course - Luthor cloned Superman!" she remembered, thinking of their first-season episode.

Clark and Lois exchanged surprised glances. "Luthor was behind that clone too? Mind you, it would make sense..." Clark murmured.

"Sure he was - or at least, he was in our show," Conor replied. "He used a lock of hair Superman had donated to a charity auction."

Clark frowned. "Yeah, that's how it was done. But how the heck did the writers of your show know about that?"

"I have no idea, but I bet your friend Mr Wells had something to do with it," Conor observed shrewdly. "He told us a lot of what was in our show actually happened to you two."

Laura fixed Lois with an enquiring gaze. "There's something I've wondered about ever since we found out you two really exist," she said quizzically. "Lois, how could you have almost married Lex Luthor?"

The two actors were completely unprepared for the reaction to that seemingly innocent question. Lois jumped to her feet, clearly very upset, her eyes flashing fire at Laura. Clark, in an instant, was by Lois's side, his arm around her shoulder in a comforting, protective gesture, but his own expression was coldly angry.

"That is absolutely none of your - " Lois began.

Clark cut across her, enunciating clearly and with emphasis. "I think that if we're going to make progress here, one thing we need to agree on is that certain topics are off-limits. And one of those topics is Lex Luthor."

"Agreed," Conor replied, clearly shaken by the abrupt change in atmosphere. He felt as if the temperature in his living-room had dropped by several degrees; the universe's newest Superman actually shivered.

Laura began to collect up the coffee-cups and other crockery, using that as an excuse to escape from the room. She was aware that she had put her foot in it badly. She had never expected Lois to react so furiously to her enquiry. After all, from what they knew of the Metropolis couple, it was five years since Lois had almost married

Luthor, and she had been married to Clark for well over two years now. Surely the Luthor business was ancient history? Clearly it wasn't, and Laura couldn't help but feel that there was more to this. Still, she \*had\* put her foot in it and upset their visitors, and she needed to think of a way of making amends.

Back in the living-room, Clark decided it was time to get on with what he and Lois had been brought to Conor's world for. Re-taking his seat, and gently pulling Lois down beside him, he spoke calmly. "We understand that because you only found out you were Superman about a month ago, Conor, you're still getting used to your powers. But didn't you have them when you were growing up?"

Grateful for the change of subject, Conor nodded. "I guess. But I was under a lot of pressure to be 'normal,' so I hid what I could do, pretended I was imagining a lot of the strange things I was experiencing - and gradually it became so normal to suppress what I could do that \*I\* believed there was nothing different about me! Would you believe that Laura figured out about my powers before I did?"

Despite her earlier anger, Lois found herself feeling sympathy; a glance at Clark told her that her husband shared her feelings.

Clark looked directly at Conor and commented, "Then you have a lot of things to get used to. My powers started to develop once I was about ten or eleven - and after I almost burned down the barn my parents and I agreed I needed to practice to get the hang of what I could do. That way I'd be able to use my powers safely - without anyone realising."

"You were lucky to have such understanding parents," Conor told him, not without a touch of envy.

Clark smiled. "Yeah - they're the best." In a more serious tone, he continued, "I also did a lot of reading around that time - human physiology, physics and so on - to make sure I understood just how much pressure of different types a human body can withstand without harm. So I know just how far I can go to stop criminals without causing them serious harm, or how fast I can fly with someone in my arms."

"Hmmm - looks like I'm due a trip to Barnes and Noble," Conor mused aloud. "Hope no-one wonders why Conor Kane is buying serious science textbooks."

Laura, who had just slipped silently back into the room, murmured, "You can just say it's for research - after all, you have given up acting in favour of script-writing."

Conor smiled at her, drawing her into the circle of his arms. "What would I do without you, honey? I may have the super-strength, but you're the brains of this partnership."

"Sounds familiar," Clark murmured, smiling at Lois and including the other two in his smile.

"Lois..." Laura began nervously, anxious to repair the damage. "I'm sorry - "

She broke off as she and Lois simultaneously noticed that their men had both become distracted. Lois touched Clark's arm. "Honey?"

Conor answered. "Armed robbery - downtown LA, from what I can tell." He spun into his Superman outfit and prepared to depart, but Clark took a step in his direction.

"Want me to come?"

Conor paused. "Well, I think I can handle this one... it's not like it's an earthquake or anything..." His tone suggested that he was somewhat offended at Clark's offer.

Clark, however, had little patience with what he half-suspected was prima-donna-ish behaviour, and replied politely but firmly, "I wasn't suggesting that I would do anything, but that I could just watch how you handle the situation. After all, if you *\*want\** me to help you get used to controlling your powers, I have to see what, if anything, you're doing wrong first."

Feeling a little abashed - it was a very reasonable and helpful proposition after all - Conor nodded. "Okay."

Clark glanced down at himself, at the black jeans and shirt he was wearing. "I should be okay like this - I can stay high enough to be out of sight."

"Then let's get going!" Conor urged, leading the way out of the French doors into the back garden.

Laura raised an eyebrow at Lois. "Is he always like that?"

"Like what?" Lois demanded, ready to refute any criticism of her husband.

"So... in charge! And so *\*darned\** reasonable with it!"

Despite herself, Lois found herself grinning at her other-world counterpart. "Incessantly."

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Superman landed outside the La Mirada branch of the First Bank of California, quickly assessing the situation. Four armed robbers were in the process of shooting their way out of the bank, while half-a-dozen of LAPD's finest were shooting back. A number of curious passers-by were watching in fascination. One big problem with LA, Conor thought cynically - everyone thinks this kind of shoot-out is just Hollywood's latest movie.

He quickly placed himself between the robbers and the police, allowing the bullets to bounce off his chest, then sent darts of heat vision to the hands gripping the guns; within seconds, screams could be heard as the robbers dropped their weapons and tried to make a run for it. Not wanting any trigger-happy police officer to fire yet more shots, Conor flew towards the fleeing robbers and grabbed them, using super-speed to 'borrow' some of the officers' handcuffs and secure them.

His task finished, he glanced skywards to where, he hoped, Clark would be waiting; he could just make out a black shadow on the rooftop of a building on the next block. Conor took off, flying upwards and assuming that Clark would follow him; he led to the way to a remote spot on top of the Santa Monica Mountains.

"Well? How did I do?" he asked eagerly; almost like a puppy wanting to be praised, Clark thought.

Clark sighed heavily. "Ohhh boy."

Conor frowned. "What do you mean? I apprehended them, and no-one got killed - as *would* have happened if I hadn't turned up."

It was Clark's turn to frown. Clearly he would have to handle this carefully; his younger counterpart seemed a little sensitive about his handiwork. He levitated into a sitting position, cross-legged, and gestured that Conor should do the same. Then he gave Conor a level stare.

"If you want to learn, you need to listen to me here. The first problem was you catching those bullets on your chest," Clark explained.

Conor stared at him. "What do you mean? It worked... and that's the way I used to... I mean, in the show...."

< In the show...> Clark sighed heavily; this was going to be harder than he'd expected. "I see. Maybe I should watch some episodes of this show of yours - see what other crazy things your director had you doing."

Conor shook his head. "I don't understand."

"No," Clark replied. He could see that this inexperienced Superman didn't. "Okay. If you catch bullets on your chest, mostly they'll flatten with the force of the impact - some of them will fall to the ground, but it's equally possible that some of them would bounce back. And if they do, they could hit someone, and *hurt* someone."

Conor was silent. Of *course* that was a possibility - but he'd never thought of that. And it was so obvious that he should have thought of it. Clark was right: he had a lot to learn.

Swallowing his pride, he met Clark's gaze and said, "Okay, what should I do?"

"Catch them in your hand," Clark explained. "All right, bullets move fast, but as long as you've seen them fired you should be quick enough to catch them. Then you can crush them - or if you need to, you should be able to hand them over to the police as evidence. It's all a matter of controlling the strength of your grip."

Conor nodded. "Okay. I can do that." He paused. "So, what else did I do wrong?"

Clark was reassured: he was making progress. Conor was willing to accept his mistakes and learn how to do better. "Well, you made the



robbers drop their guns by using heat vision. Now, that's fine in some circumstances, but you really need to be sure that you can control the strength of the heat. I could see second-degree burns on at least two guys' hands."

Conor's face fell. "I know. That's what I really have problems with - controlling my strength and powers at times." He paused, remembering, then continued, his expression agonised, "You know what? A week ago, I... Laura...." He paused, struggling to maintain his composure. Clark watched in silent sympathy and encouragement. Conor inhaled a long, shuddering breath and continued, "We were in bed, I... I just lost control, and I hurt her. She had bruises for days. She didn't complain, but...."

"But that just made you feel worse about it?" Clark suggested. "Hey, I've been there - I was attacked by red kryptonite a couple of years back and lost control of my powers. I hurt Lois too, but she tried to hide it - she covered up the bruises and I only saw them by accident." He paused, ensuring that he had Conor's full attention. "I know *\*exactly\** how you feel. But in your case there's no Kryptonite, so you can learn how to exert control over yourself. I'll help you."

Conor took another shuddering breath. "Thanks, Clark. I'd appreciate that more than anything else." He paused, then in a more normal tone asked, "So how would you recommend getting rid of the guns?"

Clark shrugged. "You could do any number of things. Grab the guns at super-speed, blow freezing breath at the bad guys to make them drop them, blow hard with your super-breath to knock them off balance... it depends on the situation really. There, I'd probably have used super-speed and tied them up at the same time as I disarmed them."

Conor nodded. "Makes sense."

Clark dropped to the ground, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. "Conor, we will work on this stuff, I promise. But right now, do you mind if we get on back to your place? I'm just... kinda concerned about Lois."

Conor nodded again, beginning to drift upwards. "Sure. Uh... y'know, Clark, Laura didn't mean to upset Lois... I know she's really sorry she ever mentioned Lex Luthor."

Clark sighed, giving Conor a wry smile. He supposed it really wasn't this man's fault - or even his fiancée's. "I know. You have to understand it's kind of weird for us... I mean, so much of what has actually happened in our lives seems to have been just some sort of make-believe in your world, and it's difficult for us to get used to having so much of our past exposed as common knowledge."

"And it can't help to have us treating your lives as some sort of curiosity," Conor acknowledged.

Clark nodded. "But it's not just that Lois... almost marrying Luthor has bad memories for us, though it *\*does\**, I promise you. The thing is, Luthor didn't die when he jumped - he came back and went after us again."

"Yeah - well, if these weird parallels between our show and your lives are still holding up, there's a script we were just about to film - Luthor comes back from the dead, lures Lois to some underground sewer, and nearly kills her."

Again taken aback by the similarity between this TV show and his life, Clark blinked, then regained control of his emotions. "Yeah, that happened. But I caught him and handed him over to the police - that wasn't a problem. He resurfaced a year later - he escaped from prison on what should have been our wedding day, kidnapped Lois, replaced her with a clone - who I \*married\* - and I didn't find out until a couple of days later. In the meantime, Lois hit her head and lost her memory, and Luthor persuaded her that she was in love with him, not me. He almost succeeded in killing me and taking Lois off to Europe with him." He paused, his eyes cold and bitter with the memories. "He died then, finally, but a year later his son also tried to take Lois away from me. I only just managed to get her out of that one alive."

Conor blinked. "No wonder you and Lois were upset."

"Yeah." Clark did his best to put the memories behind him; most of the time, he and Lois told each other that they had got over what had happened, and that Luthor no longer had the power to hurt them. But he knew, inside, that this simply wasn't true. It would take him a long time to forget the hurt and despair of those weeks after their first wedding, and he knew that Lois felt the same way.

"Let's get going," he urged Conor.

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Left alone in the house in Santa Monica, Lois and Laura faced each other awkwardly.

"Lois, I - I'm really sorry about earlier. I never meant to upset you and Clark," Laura said sincerely.

Lois nodded tautly. Perhaps she had been a little hard on this woman - this person who was a stranger, and yet who was so familiar it was almost like looking in the mirror. "I shouldn't have let myself get so wound up, but if you knew about everything Luthor has done to Clark and me, you'd understand... anyway, I'm not going to get into that now."

Laura nodded in return, grateful that Lois seemed to have accepted her olive branch. "Okay - I won't ask. If he's even half as creepy in real life as we showed him on TV, he's not someone I'd like to meet either."

"Oh, he's dead now, thankfully," Lois replied, brushing her hair away from her face with her fingers. \*That\* time he had definitely been dead - or at least, so far it seemed that way. His body had been found, and had been buried in a high-security crypt in order to prevent anyone trying to dig it up; Lois knew that Clark occasionally flew over the crypt just to check that it hadn't been disturbed in any way.

"Want more coffee?" Laura asked; on receiving an answer in the affirmative she suggested they go through to the kitchen. Lois

continued to peer around the house as Laura led the way towards the kitchen, which was situated at the rear of the building.

"Hmmm - nice kitchen," Lois observed. "I could just see Clark cooking in here."

"So you really can't cook?" Laura asked. "This is so weird - I mean, that you're so like we played you in the show."

Lois stared at her. "How is it *\*everyone\** knows I can't cook?" She shrugged. "Well, I am improving - Clark's taught me how to make stir-fry, and I can cook Jon's food. How about you?"

"Jon?" It was Laura's turn to be surprised.

"Our son - he's almost a year old." Lois frowned; she *\*knew\** Jon would be fine with Jonathan and Martha, and in any case, if HG Wells kept his word and returned them at the same moment at which he'd taken them away, Jon wouldn't even have time to miss them. But *\*she\** couldn't help missing him, and unlike when she and Clark were at the Planet and he was at daycare, she couldn't phone and check up on him - nor could Clark fly overhead and look to see if he was okay.

"You and Clark have a child... will he have super-powers too?" Laura seemed to be finding this difficult to assimilate. Lois, watching her, felt that she understood.

"You're wondering whether, if you and Conor have kids, you're going to have two-year-olds flying around the house?" Laura's wry expression gave Lois the answer to her question. "I used to worry about that too, but Clark assured me that he didn't start to develop his powers until he was about ten or so, and even then it was gradual. He didn't fly until he was eighteen. So I don't think either of us has much to worry about."

Laura gave a small sigh - that at least was a relief. She set the coffee filter to brew, then turned back to Lois. "I guess you went through all of the sort of stuff I'm experiencing?"

"Most, I guess - though in my case I had the problem of thinking Clark and Superman were two different people. Even worse, that I was in *\*love\** with two different people, Can you imagine how that felt?" Lois threw her hands out in a frustrated gesture. "I still think Clark doesn't really understand how that made me feel once we'd started dating - like every time I felt excited at being with Superman I felt guilty about being unfaithful to Clark. Clark tells me that pretending with me was beginning to make him feel schizophrenic, but at least he *\*knew\** he was the same person!"

Very interested in this, Laura asked, "So how did you find out? Did he tell you?"

Lois laughed aloud. "Did he!... no he didn't! I figured it out!" She paused, then added, "To be fair, he had been trying to tell me - we just kept getting interrupted. If it wasn't Dan Scardino, or Jimmy, it was some bad guy or other trying to get revenge on us. Nigel St John resurfaced around that time..." She paused again, glancing at Laura to see whether the name meant anything to her. It clearly did, so St John must also have appeared in their TV show. "Anyway, in the midst of it all, I finally figured it out."

"How?" Laura was now very curious. "We always thought it was so weird that Lois didn't guess - I mean, how many more times did Clark have to run off just before Superman arrived before the penny dropped?"

"Oh, don't remind me," Lois groaned. "When I think of all the \*stupid\* excuses... the 'Cheese of the Month Club'..."

"He \*really\* said that?" Laura was almost doubled up with laughter. "Oh, I \*have\* to tell Conor - he'll crack up! We always thought that one was so corny, even the fans wouldn't believe he said it."

"Oh, he said it all right," Lois drawled wryly. "\*And\* I just accepted it, too!"

"So, what did make you figure it out?"

Lois's face assumed a dreamy expression. "It was the way he touched me - the same way Conor touched you earlier, Laura. Like that..." She mimicked the caress along her jawline. "We were going through kind of a tough time with St John and an accomplice of his. Clark was upset and I was trying to comfort him, and he touched me.... Then the following day I was with Superman, trying to persuade him to help me do something he didn't really want to do - " for some reason, Lois was reluctant to tell Laura about asking Clark to freeze her, " - and he touched me too, in exactly the same way." She paused, tracing circles around the worksurface with her index finger as she reminisced. "I didn't put two and two together immediately - well, there was too much else going on, for a start. But later, I started thinking - and it all made sense. He \*had\* to be Superman."

Laura grinned. "I knew Conor was Superman before he did!"

"Yeah, Mr Wells told us that," Lois replied, not a little aggrieved that her counterpart had figured out Conor's secret so quickly; \*she\* was the investigative journalist, after all. She was struck by another, more mundane, thought. "If Conor didn't realise he had his powers until a few weeks ago, how did he cope with things like cutting his hair and shaving?"

Laura shrugged. "I think it was kind of like mind over matter. You know, he'd convinced himself that there was nothing different about him, so a lot of the time it seemed like there wasn't. He told me he'd always visited barbers, and shaved with normal razors - he just seemed to go through more than other guys. Then the morning after we found out that he's this world's Superman, he discovered he couldn't shave with a razor. So he experimented with the way the Clark on our show was supposed to have done it - and he nearly passed out when it worked!"

Lois laughed. "I'd love to have seen that! Mind you, the first time I saw Clark cut his own hair using his heat vision and a couple of mirrors I thought I was watching a sci-fi movie. The things I've got used to over the past four years... you'd never believe!" Lois stopped herself, and smiled again. "On the other hand, you probably would - you'll be getting used to them yourself!" Laura joined in Lois's laughter, the two women suddenly feeling at ease with each other. A thought struck Lois then, and she faced her younger counterpart. "Tell me something - if Conor played Superman on TV for

over a year, how on earth is it that he's not recognised?"

"Ah!" Laura grinned. "Come and take a look." She led the way out of the kitchen and down the hall into a room Lois hadn't been in yet. This was nearer the front of the house, and as soon as Laura opened the doors Lois noticed the publicity stills and posters on the wall. Her gaze was drawn to an almost full-size poster of Conor dressed as Superman, with Laura as Lois clinging to his thigh in a deliberately provocative position. Laura gestured at the picture. "See? Conor looks very different from his normal self in that suit - but he also looks completely different in the suit your Clark gave him."

Lois gazed thoughtfully at the pictures. "You know, you're right, she agreed slowly. "If I didn't know the Superman of this world is Conor, I probably wouldn't recognise him either."

Laura nodded. "They used a lot of makeup for the TV show as well - that makes a difference. I think they felt Conor was a bit too dark-skinned for the role - after all, Metropolis is supposed to be somewhere much further north - so they made his skin paler, both as Clark and as Superman."

Lois laughed. "That might mean Conor could get away without having to wear glasses! Not that Clark minds - he's used to it now, and he says the glasses help to prevent him using his super-vision accidentally."

"It's so really great to talk to you, Lois!" Laura exclaimed suddenly. "You don't know what it's been like the last few weeks, trying to help Conor get used to all this, his powers... and at the same time trying to get used to it myself. I love Conor to bits, you know, but there've been times...." She broke off, her expression revealing the tension and strain of the past month.

"Well, that's what we're here for," Lois reassured her in a bracing tone, intuitively recognising that overt sympathy was not what the other woman needed right now. "I've no idea how long Mr Wells intends us to stay, but something he said made me think he meant at least a couple of days, so we'll have plenty of time to talk." She threw Laura an encouraging smile, deliberately not letting the other woman see the real sympathy she felt. Lois couldn't imagine how she would have managed if she hadn't had Martha and Jonathan's calm, humorous understanding to turn to.

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Conor's flight slowed as he and Clark approached his home. Turning to glance at his companion, he commented, "Everything seems okay - they're in my study, just talking."

Clark grinned. "That's a relief - I was afraid Lois might have started tearing Laura's hair out."

"Really? She's really as manic as we play her, then?"

Clark frowned. "I wouldn't call her 'manic', exactly...."

"Well, the writers called her 'Mad Dog Lane' in the Pilot," Conor informed him.

"Ah!" Clark laughed. "Well, I have to admit that name has been mentioned once or twice...."

As they were about to land in the back yard, Conor paused and murmured something to Clark. The two men laughed, but Clark commented, "Okay, but I bet Lois won't be fooled."

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"Hey - sounds like the guys are back," Laura announced, her attention attracted by sounds in the living-room. The two women hurried out and into the other room, only to stop dead at the sight of two identical Super-heroes, both dressed in Superman costumes and both standing in the distinctive posture, arms folded in front of their chests.

Laura caught Lois's arm and whispered quickly to her; Conor, watching and enjoying the joke, was taken by surprise as he saw Laura hurry to Clark and fling her arms around his neck, raising his mouth for his kiss. He had little time to react, since \*Lois\* was suddenly in his arms and her lips were teasing his jaw. Instinctively, his arms came around her, but his gaze followed Laura, a pang of jealousy twisting in his stomach as he wondered whether she would prefer the man he couldn't help but think of as the \*real\* Superman.

Clark gripped Laura lightly at her waist and gave her an amused smile while holding her a little away from him; his gaze sought Lois and as he saw the laughter in her eyes he laughed softly. "I knew we wouldn't fool \*you\*, sweetheart," he teased her.

Lois laughed in response. "We knew what you'd done as soon as we saw you - and this was Laura's idea."

"Laura?" queried Conor. "You \*knew\* it was Clark, not me, honey?"

"Sure I did!" his fiancée reassured him. "Darling, I'd know you anywhere - even if you do have identical twin brothers in every other universe, \*you're\* the only Super man for me."

Conor gently put Lois away from him - "No offence, Lois," he assured her swiftly - and caught Laura in his arms, his lips claiming hers in a long, passionate kiss. Lois, now safely in Clark's arms, watched in amusement.

"Were we that bad, honey?" she asked him.

"\*Were\* we? According to Jimmy, we're \*always\* that bad!" Clark assured her.

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Over the next hour or so Conor felt like pinching himself several times, except that if this was a dream he definitely did not want to wake up. For the first time since he had discovered his amazing powers he was able to talk to someone who understood just how he felt, what he was experiencing and the problems he faced. Laura tried - and he was well aware that he could not have survived the past few weeks without her - but having Clark Kent around, however briefly, was a dream come true.

After the first half-hour or so, Laura had invited Lois to take a tour of the house; he'd suspected that they were being tactful in leaving him alone with their guest. He felt as if he was asking hundreds of questions, and because of that he kept interrupting himself to insist that Clark should tell him if he was being a nuisance. But his slightly older counterpart - Clark had explained that he was thirty-three to Conor's almost thirty - had insisted that his purpose in being in Conor's world was precisely so that Conor could bombard him with questions. So they had talked about their shared history; Conor learned that the version of his history which their show had used was actually pretty accurate, which was quite a shock to Clark.

"They - your writers - knew about the globe?"

"Looks like it," Conor confirmed. He fell silent; it was another shocking realisation that the scene he had played out for the cameras, where he had displayed such emotion on learning of his origins, was actually how it had happened for Clark. Not only that, but the two people who had placed the baby in the capsule were actually his birth parents. He had \*known\* that since he'd discovered the truth about himself, but it had taken Clark's quiet explanation of the circumstances of their joint origin to bring that home to him.

He found himself wishing that Clark had thought to bring the real globe with him; even though Conor had seen the messages, almost word-for-word by what Clark had said, it would have been so much better to see the real thing.

Clark leaned forward suddenly, closing some of the gap created by the two large sofas set several feet apart. "I have it with me."

Conor started. "What?"

"The globe. That \*was\* what you were thinking, wasn't it?" Clark enquired, an amused gleam in his eyes.

"How did you...? Oh, I guess - uh, it must have been pretty easy to figure out what I was thinking," Conor stammered.

"Probably," Clark countered, "but in fact I heard you."

Conor almost fell off the sofa. "You \*heard\* me?"

Clark nodded. "Look, it's a long story and I don't really want to get started on it right now, but Kryptonians communicate telepathically. I found out about it a couple of years ago."

Conor shook his head. First the flying and the other super-powers... now telepathy. "So I can read your mind too?"

"Probably. If you want to. But I kind of felt it was an invasion of privacy, so when I met the other Kryptonians I didn't do it. They \*talk\* that way, though."

"Other...?" Conor stared, aghast. "There are more of us in your world?"

Clark sighed. "No - they just came on a visit. Like I said, Conor, it's a long story. If we have time before Lois and I have to go back, I'll tell you all about them. For now, let's just say that I hope they don't come for you."

Come for me...? Conor frowned, wondering what else lay in store for him. This didn't sound too good. But Clark was getting to his feet, moving to where he had left the black holdall he had been carrying when they had arrived.

"Here it is." In his hand, he held a translucent white object. After a couple of moments it began to glow, and a map of Earth appeared, which was quickly replaced by a map of Krypton. Conor sat in stunned silence as the globe played its five messages in turn.

"Wow... that is really something," he whispered as the globe glowed one last time before reverting to pearly white. "I wonder where mine went?"

Clark frowned. "You say you landed in Smallville, just like I did, except that HG Wells took you from there and brought you forty years into the future?"

Conor nodded, wondering where this was leading. Clark didn't immediately enlighten him, instead asking where Lois and Laura had gone. Shrugging, Conor answered him. "I think Laura took her upstairs - I guess they were being tactful."

Nodding, Clark headed for the door. "I think we might need them, Conor. There's something I just thought of, and Wells did say that there was something else we might need to help you with..."

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Upstairs, Laura had taken Lois to the guest-room. "Since we don't know how long you and Clark are staying, the least we can do is give you somewhere to sleep!" she had explained, laughing.

It was a lovely room, Lois thought; from the spacious interior, the polished floorboards, the fitted cupboards and dressing-table, the window-seat and the luxurious ensuite bathroom. Hollywood actors were certainly paid more than award-winning journalists, that was for sure.

Lois duly admired the room, but then changed the subject to their respective menfolk. "I think you were right to leave Conor alone with Clark - there's obviously a lot he wants to ask, and they'll both get on with it better without us around."

Laura nodded. "I did want to stay - there's so much about Conor I want to be able to understand, and there are things I want to ask Clark too."

"You'll get your chance," Lois assured her. "And I can probably answer a lot for you too."

Laura sat down heavily on the bed, welcoming the opportunity to discuss some of the things she had found difficult to cope with. "How do you cope when he comes home exhausted and tearing himself apart



because he hasn't been able to save someone?"

Lois came to sit beside her, instinctively reaching out for the younger woman's hands. "That's tough. Clark gets like that too, and though he's getting better these days at accepting that it's not his fault, he still obsesses."

"Obsesses!" Laura leapt on the word. "That's exactly what Conor does."

Lois nodded. "Well, they are the same person - they may have had different upbringings and they have different careers now, so there will be differences in their personalities. But Clark wouldn't be the person he is without that compassion. And I guess if Conor didn't share that, he wouldn't be Kal-El."

"That's true," Laura agreed. "You know, all the time we were making the show, I thought Conor was really different from the character he played - but in the last few weeks I've realised just how similar he is." She paused, thinking. "I figured after a while that he'd been suppressing what he could do for so long he'd actually turned himself into someone he isn't. The Conor I first met was a real extrovert, and that's how most of the cast and crew saw him. But once I got to know him better I realised that underneath he has so many doubts about himself..."

"Just like Clark," Lois observed.

Laura stared at her. "But he seems so confident, so sure of himself..."

"Yeah, he's good at that," Lois agreed. "He can be very reassuring to other people. He's just not very good at reassuring himself!"

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"So what's this about, Clark?" Conor asked, once Lois and Laura had joined them in the living-room.

Clark took up a position in front of the large, decorative hearth. "It occurred to me that, if your spaceship landed in Schuster's Field in Smallville like mine did, then something else might also be there."

Lois stared at her husband. "You mean Kryptonite, don't you, Clark?" She thought swiftly. "Bureau 39 found it, in our world - but here, no-one knew there was a Superman until a few weeks ago, and they certainly won't know when or where Conor got here..."

"Unless they put two and two together from our TV show," Laura intervened. "So far Conor's managed to avoid giving any interviews, so no-one knows how close the show is to reality."

"Keep it that way," Clark advised grimly. "Trust me on this, if your world has any of the lunatics we've encountered, you're better not giving them any opportunity to harm you or Laura."

Conor nodded soberly. "So what about this Kryptonite, Clark? What are you suggesting?"

"We need to find it and get rid of it," Clark explained. "That's why I need you, Lois - you'll have to handle the stuff."

Lois nodded agreement. Laura looked puzzled. "How will you find it, if it's been there nearly sixty years?"

Clark grinned wryly in spite of himself. "Oh, I'll find it, Laura, trust me!"

Realising what he meant, Lois grabbed his arm. "No, Clark, you are \*not\* going to expose yourself to the stuff - I won't let you!"

But he turned to her, kissing her softly in reassurance. "Lois, honey, it'll be okay. All I need to do is use my vision to see where it is - once I feel its effects I'll get well away from it, I promise you!"

Although she still wasn't happy about the situation, Lois reluctantly conceded that Clark was right: there was no other way of doing it. She returned his kiss, then said, "Okay, let's do it."

"When do you want us to go?" Conor asked.

But Clark frowned at him. "I don't think you should come, Conor. Look," he added, as Conor stared at him in disbelief, "you've never been exposed to this stuff. The first time I encountered it I was really sick and my powers were gone for two days. It's not so bad for me now I've been exposed to it a number of times, so I'll be okay. You should keep away from it."

Conor stared straight at Clark, meeting the brown eyes which were twins of his own. "Clark, I know I've never encountered it. But think about it - there's no guarantee I never will, so it's better that I come across it now, when we expect it to happen, so I can at least recognise what Kryptonite exposure feels like? It'll make it easier to deal with if I meet it again."

Clark remained unconvinced, though he stayed silent. Conor added, "Look, I know you don't accept what I'm saying..." < < I can \*feel\* you telling me you don't>> he added silently, as to his shock he realised that he actually could 'hear' Clark's thoughts. < This telepathy stuff actually works!> he acknowledged, barely believing what was happening to him. "But apart from anything else, I'd also kind of like to see Smallville - sure, I know I could go any time, but I'm not likely to get the opportunity to have you show me around again, am I? Clark, I \*want\* to come - and so does Laura," he added, having seen his fiancée's expression.

"Yeah, I do," Laura agreed, "but is it safe, Clark? I don't want either of you hurt..."

Lois answered; she felt that Laura might be more convinced hearing it from her rather than Clark. "Yeah, it'll be fine, Laura. Clark's right - as long as he doesn't stay within range for more than a minute or so, he'll be okay. Conor will need to be more careful though."

Laura nodded acceptance. "But... if Kryptonite makes you Kryptonians lose your powers, how will we get back?" she enquired, bemused.

Clark laughed. "Trust me, it'll be okay. Really - I'd have to be exposed for quite a while now to lose my powers completely. And if Conor has any problems, I can get us all back."

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Clark, with Lois in his arms, paused just below cloud-level and gestured to Conor who had drawn level with him. "Down there - that's the Kent farmhouse."

Conor stared using his super-vision; it didn't look much like the farmhouse they'd used on the show. Laura nudged his arm. "Hey, Conor, don't forget I don't have your super-sight!"

"Is it safe to land?" Conor asked Clark. "What do you think?"

Clark thought for a few moments. "I don't see why not - we can't get close to the farmhouse, but there are other places I can show you, like Rocky Cove. We probably better not go into Smallville itself - you don't want people wondering why Superman is in town, and if Laura's recognised you'll really have problems."

The brief tour of the countryside around Smallville was more difficult than Conor had imagined it would be. It finally dawned on him just what he had been deprived of by the action HG Wells had taken. He had to remind himself that if the time-travelling writer had not taken that course of action, Conor probably wouldn't have lived anyway, since Tempus had gone back to 1940 in order to kill him. But he was aware, both from his TV show and from some of the things Clark had said, that Martha and Jonathan Kent were - had been, for of course in his world they were both dead - an amazing couple. Clark's childhood, apart from the need to come to terms with his super-powers, had been very happy. Conor's own childhood had not been so pleasant; his adoptive parents had never paid very much attention to him, other than insisting on 'normal' behaviour, and once he'd left home at the age of eighteen he had not kept in close contact with them.

From the way Laura pressed her body close to his, Conor realised that she understood the thoughts which were going through his mind, and he threw his arm around her shoulder in grateful appreciation. He caught Clark's eye then, and realised that his older counterpart also understood; how this was so, Conor wasn't quite sure, as he hadn't 'felt' Clark reading his mind. This telepathy thing was going to take some getting used to, he conceded ruefully. There was also the issue of privacy - although he half-wondered whether it only worked when the other person 'permitted' their thoughts to be read. Kinda like you can't read files on a remote computer over a network unless they're marked for file-sharing, he reasoned. Self-consciously, he tried 'closing' his mind to Clark, and was rewarded by an understanding, sympathetic look in the other man's eyes.

Some time later, Clark led the way into Schuster's Field, pausing a little way beyond the stile to prepare himself mentally for the possible encounter with Kryptonite. Lois saw the deep breaths her husband was taking, and she gripped his hand, offering comfort and what support she could. Gesturing to Conor to stay back, Clark walked determinedly forward.

About half-way across the field he stopped suddenly as waves of pain hit his body. Lois grabbed his arm. "Clark? It's here, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he gasped, willing his body to withstand the effects of the deadly meteorite. He took a couple of steps backwards and, lowering his glasses, scanned the area. Yes, there it was, buried under a few inches of earth and grass. He glanced around, then picked up a stick which lay a few feet away, and threw it. It stabbed the earth just above where the Kryptonite lay.

"Okay, Lois - over to you," Clark murmured, stepping well back. Lois hurried over to the marked spot, carrying the small spade they'd picked up at the hardware store in town. They had decided that Lois was least likely of the four of them to arouse suspicion in Smallville, so she had been the one to do the shopping; as well as the spade, she had bought a large roll of silver foil, which had been the nearest to lead they could think of.

Laura hurried over and helped; within a couple of minutes several chunks of glowing green rock lay on the grass. Conor watched from his vantage-point some distance away, fascinated by the sight of this rock which, if he got too close, could kill him. It really did glow, he thought, amazed. It had a kind of translucent quality, and something about it...

...was drawing him closer, almost impelling him to move forward.

He took a tentative step, just as Clark yelled at him, "Conor, what the heck are you doing?!"

Suddenly, waves of excruciating pain hit him. His entire body screamed at him in agony. His legs refused to hold him, and he collapsed to the ground; his inner organs throbbed and felt as if they were going to burst. His chest felt tight, and his breath came in sharp, painful gasps.

It had only been a bare second, but Clark could see that Conor was already suffering badly. The Kryptonite was hardly affecting him at this distance, but Conor's lack of previous exposure was making it hard for him. Clark swept the younger man into his arms and retreated with him to the stile, calling to Lois to hurry up and get the meteorite safely wrapped up.

As Clark laid Conor down on the grass Laura hurried over, her face pale. "Is... is he okay, Clark?" she exclaimed anxiously.

Clark smiled reassuringly up at her as he crouched by Conor's side checking his vital signs. "He's fine. Give him a couple of minutes to catch his breath - he won't have his powers at first, but that shouldn't last long. He wasn't close enough to the stuff to have suffered any real harm."

"Yeah, I'm okay," Conor insisted, reaching for Laura's hand. "Hey, Clark, you didn't exaggerate about that stuff being poisonous! I've never felt so awful in my life!" He began to sit up, but gave up the attempt as his head spun again.

Lois had by now wrapped up the Kryptonite, but was keeping her

distance. "Clark, what do you want to do with this stuff?" she called.

Clark glanced at the two actors. "Can you two make your way along the road on your own? I don't think we should hang about in the field much longer. Lois and I will be back as soon as we can."

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Although he had put on a brave face for Laura's benefit, Conor was feeling pretty terrible; in fact, he couldn't remember ever having ached so much in his life, even after a day hanging suspended from that cursed harness the studios had used. Since realising his true identity and discovering the extent of his invulnerability, he had forgotten how it felt to experience pain, and this brutal reminder was an experience he would rather not have had. Still, in order not to worry Laura, he had dragged himself to his feet with the aid of the fence and Clark's arm; they were being careful not to perform any feats of enhanced strength or other super-power anywhere they could have been in public view.

Once Clark and Lois had disappeared back into the trees for their take-off - Clark had announced that he intended to fly out over the Pacific so that Lois could drop the lethal package into the deepest part of the ocean - Conor had taken Laura's arm and they had begun to walk slowly back along the road as Clark had suggested. It was hard going, especially since Conor was doing his best not to lean too heavily on Laura. As they went, he mused on Clark's account of his first encounter with Kryptonite, and Conor wondered whether his own powers would also take a couple of days to return. He almost didn't mind not having them, he thought with a grimace; it was the pain which was the worst thing about this remnant of his home planet.

Although, he reminded himself, *\*not\** having powers for a day or so would mean that he was wasting Clark's time: the purpose of the older man's visit was so that Clark could help Conor to understand and use his powers. They couldn't do that if he didn't have any powers, he realised. He sighed; perhaps he shouldn't have insisted on coming to Smallville. But he instantly rejected that thought: he wouldn't for anything have missed Clark's guided tour of his home town. And encountering Kryptonite had been an educational, if excruciating, experience. It had certainly given him a healthy respect for the substance!

Laura glanced anxiously at Conor; apart from his words just after Clark had carried him to the edge of the field, he had been silent, and his face was white and pinched. "Conor - sweetheart, are you okay?" she asked fearfully.

He turned to her, shooting a quick smile in her direction. He wouldn't be able to fool her, that was for sure. "Well, I've been better, honey. But it's not so bad now that stuff's nowhere near me. I'm sure once we get home again I'll be okay."

A thought struck Laura. "How are we going to get home, if you're like this? Your powers are gone, aren't they?"

"Yeah." She was right; Conor hadn't thought of that. He glanced at

her again. "Clark said he and Lois would be back soon - we'll sort something out then. I guess if necessary he can make three trips." < And you'll be flying in his arms instead of mine> Conor thought, realising that he felt somewhat uneasy at the prospect. He wasn't sure why - after all, he trusted both Clark and Laura, but... at the same time, he just didn't like the idea of Laura being carried by any Super-being but himself.

They reached a small wood, and Conor paused to catch his breath; his legs were screaming at him to sit down. As he leaned against a nearby tree trunk, he heard his voice say sympathetically, from a few feet away, "Hurts like hell, doesn't it?"

He swung around; it wasn't his own voice, but Clark's. The man just sounded so like him! "You got rid of it, then?"

Lois appeared from behind another tree. "Dropped right in the middle of the ocean."

"Good." Laura's voice was hard. "Let's hope that's the last of the stuff."

Lois exchanged glances with Clark. She understood Laura's feelings perfectly; she also knew, however, that it was more than likely that this would not be Conor's last encounter with Kryptonite. She didn't want to distress either of their new friends any further, however, so she suggested, in a lighter tone, "So what's your suggestion for getting us back to Santa Monica, Clark?"

Clark shrugged. "Conor first - partly because he needs to rest in the sun, and he can do that there, and also because I want to avoid anyone seeing two of us here. You two look more like sisters than identical twins, so it's not such a problem." He switched his gaze to Conor briefly, silently asking for, and receiving, approval for his plan.

"Laura next," was Conor's only reply.

Clark shrugged. "I can carry both Lois and Laura together." He spun quickly into his Superman outfit, then walked purposefully towards Conor. "Let's go."

As the two women watched their respective partners become a mere dot in the sky, Laura glanced at Lois. "How do you stand it?"

Initially puzzled, Lois saw her companion's expression and immediately understood. "Seeing him hurt or in danger?" She shook her head ruefully. "Thankfully it doesn't happen very often - there aren't many sources of Kryptonite, and he's managed to find and destroy most of it now." She sighed heavily. "I can't lie to you, Laura - I \*hate\* seeing Clark hurt, and it kills me that there are people who would deliberately try to kill him. He is the sweetest, gentlest, most decent man I know... and seeing him recovering from a bad case of Kryptonite poisoning is just \*horrible\*. But I stand it because... because I have to. I can't let him see just how it affects me."

Lois walked purposefully towards the centre of the small clump of trees, and Laura followed her. Recovering her composure then, Lois spoke again. "Conor will be fine. You heard Clark - he wasn't exposed

long enough to suffer any real harm."

"I guess," Laura conceded, not entirely convinced. Her attention was distracted by a sound like rushing wind. "Clark's back - that was quick!"

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Conor lay in the warmth of the sun, relaxing in a lounge by his swimming pool. The pain was gone, but he still felt strangely weak in a way which was unfamiliar to him. Clark had assured him that this would pass, and that his powers would also return, probably within a few hours and almost certainly by morning; the exposure had not been so great, Clark had commented. If this was a minor exposure, Conor thought wryly, he never wanted to experience a lengthier one!

He heard a rushing sound, followed by voices: Clark was back with the women. Seconds later, Laura was kneeling by his side, clutching his hand and anxiously asking whether he was all right. As he reassured her and held and kissed her for a few moments, he wondered whether Lois and Clark were being discreet, since they hadn't joined them. But a few minutes later Lois strolled out onto the patio.

"Laura, Clark wondered whether he could take a look at a couple of the tapes of your show - there's something he wants to check out," she called.

Conor raised an eyebrow, remembering Clark's remarks earlier that day about his strategies in dealing with emergency situations. "Maybe I should watch them with him," he volunteered awkwardly, not entirely sure whether he wanted to sit beside the \*real\* Clark Kent as they watched Conor's attempts to play him on TV - and even worse, his attempts to act the part of Superman.

"No need," Clark called from the patio doors. "Lois and I'll watch them for a couple of hours now, and we can talk later. You should stay in the sun for as long as you can."

Laura got to her feet. "You mean the sun really does rejuvenate him? I thought that was just folklore from the comics and our show."

Clark grinned, shaking his head. "I suspect we're going to find that a lot of the mythos of your show is actually true. I'm not quite sure how that makes me feel... but I guess I can cope since we're only here for a short while."

Laura took the visitors from Metropolis into Conor's television room, which was almost like a small private cinema, dominated as it was by a large wide screen. Clark having explained what he was looking for, she hunted out a selection of tapes which she thought might be suitable.

"Try these - they're mostly second season episodes, apart from 'All Shook Up' where Superman stops an asteroid from hitting the earth...." She trailed off as Lois blinked. "Oh, that happened in your world too?" she queried before continuing. "There's Wall of Sound - I don't think the story's particularly good, but there's a lot of Superman stuff, Church of Metropolis and one or two others."

Leaving the two supplied with cold drinks and popcorn, Laura rejoined Conor.

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"It feels so weird to be without my powers," Conor told Laura reflectively. "I know I haven't always enjoyed the last month, and there have been a few times when I've wished I was... normal, just like everyone else. But now that I \*am\* just like everyone else - well, call me inconsistent, but I don't \*want\* to be."

"That's not surprising, honey," Laura assured him. "You were born to be Superman - we know that, thanks to Mr Wells. And now we've met Clark we can see a bit better just what that means."

Conor shook his head. "I could never be as good as Clark is. You should hear him talk about what he does - it all just comes so naturally to him. He doesn't have to think about the best way to deal with a villain - he just does it. I get it all wrong."

"Did he tell you that?" Laura asked sharply, instantly ready to go to the defence of her fiance.

Conor shrugged. "Not exactly - not the way you mean. He did tell me that I could have handled that bank robbery better, and he was right. And I already know I find it hard to control my powers."

"Did he have any suggestions?" Laura enquired.

Shifting into a sitting position, Conor's expression grew alert. "Actually, he did - and I do need to get down to Barnes & Noble as soon as I can. He said that as soon as he realised the extent of his powers he read as much as he could on human biology and physiology, physics and chemistry, so that he could figure out how much power he could use safely in particular circumstances. I guess I need to do that as soon as possible."

"You have to remember that Clark's had at least twelve years more than you to get used to his capabilities," Laura pointed out reasonably. "It's not surprising he understands what he can do. But once you learn, you'll be as good as he is."

Squeezing her hand, Conor smiled appreciatively at Laura. "You know, I understand why Superman wouldn't be complete without Lois Lane. I really couldn't manage without you to support and encourage me."

"Hey, I need you too," Laura assured him. "I love you, Conor Kane, and don't you forget it!"

The lingering kiss which followed was only interrupted by an embarrassed cough from the direction of the patio doors. Laura glanced around to see Clark standing there, clearly trying \*not\* to look in their direction.

She laughed. "Come on, Clark, you surely can't be embarrassed to see us kissing? You and Lois must...." She trailed off as she noticed the serious expression on his face. "What is it?"



Clark walked quickly across the flagstones towards Conor's lounge.  
"Conor, I can hear sirens and broadcasts on the emergency frequency - there's a fire at a hospital in West Hollywood." He gestured to his left ear as he spoke, indicating that he had picked up the sounds with his super-hearing.

Conor began to get to his feet, but stopped. "I can't do anything," he pointed out anxiously. "My powers..."

Clark shook his head. "No, I meant I'm going to go. I just thought I should let you know - check that you're okay with it."

"Why would I object?" Conor enquired, puzzled. But Clark didn't wait around for an answer, instead hurrying to the end of Conor's long garden and launching into flight up through the trees, changing into his Superman outfit as he flew. Laura and Conor glanced at each other, bewildered.

"This is your world, Conor - he wouldn't interfere here without your consent," Lois explained, walking towards them.

"Saving people's lives is hardly interfering!" Laura protested.

"I guess not," Lois agreed, "but he still wouldn't presume to take over."

Conor shrugged. "Doesn't bother me - in fact it stops me feeling guilty that I can't help right now."

He was taken aback to see Laura and Lois exchange glances.  
"Obsessing," Lois said with an amused smile. "Just like Clark!"

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As the sun set over the mountains hours later, and the area around the pool grew significantly cooler, Conor stretched and climbed off the lounge. He had followed Clark's advice and stayed there since returning from Smallville, and he had to admit that he did feel a lot better. Experimentally, he narrowed his eyes and stared hard at the wall of his house. For a split second, it began to shimmer and fade, but then his normal vision took over and all he could see was the exterior paintwork.

No powers yet, then... but an indication that they would return.

He walked slowly towards the doors leading back to the sitting-room. Laura was in there with their guests; the sound of their voices and laughter had drifted out to him over the past hour or so. He had been content to leave them to it, however, simply relaxing as he basked in the evening sunlight. Laura - and indeed, Lois - had stayed with him at first, but some time after Clark had returned he had sent Laura inside to join their guests. Lois wasn't used to California weather, he had realised: without strong sunscreen she would burn, and he hadn't wanted that. Laura, being accustomed to the weather, didn't need a strong SPF, and he had never needed sunscreen.

But it had been a pleasant afternoon, he reflected. Lois and Laura had spent some time in the pool while he had watched and joked with him. \*That\* had been interesting; he had enjoyed surreptitiously

studying Lois Lane in a swimsuit. Clark wouldn't have approved, Conor thought wryly, but he'd had no improper motive. Lois *\*was\** Laura, but four years older; her figure, especially around the breasts, was fuller. Was this how Laura would look when they'd had kids? *\*If\** they had kids.... If so, Conor thought, he would have no complaints....

Clark had returned shortly after this, and had made himself useful by bringing cold drinks and snacks out to the pool. He had also gone swimming for a while, but had then come to sit by Conor and had joined in the conversation, filling in the gaps in Lois's description of Tempus, the evil madman from the future. Conor hoped that he never encountered *\*that\** individual, he thought now, remembering what the two reporters had told him. The man was amoral; clearly had no scruples at all. But then, Conor reminded himself, he knew that: Tempus had, after all, engineered the death of the real Lois Lane, and would have killed him too had HG Wells not removed him and brought him forty years into the future.

Some time later, Clark and Lois had returned to the TV room to watch more videos, which had left Conor and Laura to talk quietly about the incredible events of the day. It was still hard to believe that Clark Kent and Lois Lane were really there, in their home.

"I like Clark, you know," Laura had commented, letting her hand trail idly along Conor's thigh. "He's quiet, though more confident than you played him on TV - though I guess that could be because he's now got Lois to love, and a family of his own. He's a pretty smart guy, too, though a little shyer than I'd have expected."

Conor had smiled at this. "Strangely enough, I like Lois too - though I guess that's not really surprising, seeing as she's you." He had squeezed Laura's hand in his. "And you were right about her, you know. You always said that Lois's softer side would show through if she found a meaningful relationship with someone she loved - that the reason she was so hard was that her life outside work was really lonely. She needed someone to love her, someone she could trust. And it looks to me as if she found him."

Laura had grinned in response. "Well, he was there all along - she just didn't see him. You know," she had added wryly, "I almost wish The Powers That Be at Marner Sisters could see those two - it might just convince them they were wrong about the 'Moonlighting' effect. Lois and Clark *\*could\** have been together and still be exciting."

Smiling, Conor had replied, "Well, that's all in the past now, and I'm glad - apart from anything else, there's no way I could play Superman on TV now. I have to find a way of making sure that there's no question in anyone's mind that Conor Kane and Superman are two totally different people."

< Thanks to having Clark here, I can do that> he reflected now as he headed inside to join Laura and their guests.

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"So, Lois, still think Conor and Laura are... what was it you said? Superficial? Egotistical?" Clark teased as the two prepared for bed.

Lois grimaced. "Well, okay, maybe \*these\* particular actors are okay, but I still say that the \*vast majority\* of Hollywood types are shallow, vain, pretentious and selfish."

Clark laughed. "I guess you don't much like actors, honey." He strolled to the window-seat and perched on it, one ankle resting across his knee.

"Not really," she conceded with a smile. "But I suppose we should have known these two would be okay - after all, they are \*us\*. And we're pretty incorruptible."

"Maybe," Clark agreed. Lois threw him a curious glance.

"Well, it's all to do with environment, isn't it, honey?" he asked her. "I mean, I was lucky - I got adopted by the greatest parents in the entire world apart from the two of us, and I grew up with people who were able to help me come to terms with... being different. So that when I became Superman, with your help, I knew what my ethics were and what I wanted to achieve." He paused, then met Lois's gaze as he continued. "The alternate Clark - well, he lost his parents when he was a kid, and he grew up lonely and confused, and the only person who knew what he could do hated that part of him. When I finally got to meet him, even though he'd been Superman for almost a year at that stage thanks to you, he was still insecure about who he was, he was desperately lonely, and I figured that he had a pretty sad life. Okay, he seemed to share my view about right and wrong, but he only seemed to have any confidence in himself when he was Superman."

He got to his feet and began to pace about the bedroom. "Then there's Conor, brought up by a couple who didn't really seem to care much about him, and didn't even seem to notice there was anything wrong when he was going through a horrible time as a teenager, knowing he was different but not understanding why. He spent most of his adult life to date wanting to fit in - a bit like I did, but actually succeeding better than I did because he simply sublimated what he could do. He went to work in - okay, I do agree with you here, he works in what is pretty much an egotistical industry which is entirely in the business of faking things. He could easily have ended up quite a shallow person...."

"You're in danger of losing your own argument here, sweetheart," Lois observed with a grin. "Because Conor is \*you\* underneath, he didn't end up like that."

"But he's not like me either," Clark replied. "Despite - or maybe in spite of - his upbringing, he's much more confident than I am. He's even over-confident as Superman, though I think he does want to learn how to do it better. I'm not sure his ethics are quite the same as mine - I \*think\* he feels the same way I do about killing, but I get the feeling he wouldn't worry so much about lying as Superman. I wouldn't do that, even if it was to protect me, or us - but I think he would."

Lois nodded, taking in Clark's point. "I guess." She laughed suddenly. "What did you think of him playing you on screen, though?"

Clark hesitated. "It was... really weird. Not just how like us they both looked - like we looked four years ago, anyway - but how accurate those storylines were." He began to pace the room again. "I know Conor told us that Wells influenced the scripts, but still.... Anyway," he continued in a brisker tone, "I thought he did a pretty good job in that earlier one we saw - the asteroid, remember? I \*did\* feel as disoriented as he looked, then. But the way he behaved as Superman sometimes just didn't work."

"Like when he swept a villain off at Super-speed?" Lois enquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Exactly," Clark agreed. "He would have vaporised the guy if he'd done that for real. And I have to talk to him about that before we leave here."

Lois frowned. "Shouldn't you have done that tonight, then? After all, we don't know when Wells is going to come back for us."

Clark shook his head. "Not a good time, Lois - the guy was feeling bad enough about the Kryptonite exposure and losing his powers. He was trying to hide it, but I could see, and anyway, remember, I know how it felt the first time it happened to me."

"It was kind of different for you, honey," Lois pointed out. "You didn't know what had happened or whether you'd ever get your powers back. He knows he will, thanks to you."

"I guess." Clark seemed distracted, and Lois slid off the bed to go to him.

Wrapping her arms around him, she murmured, "Is this hard for you, sweetheart?"

He closed his arms around her, holding her close. "Not really - I mean, Conor's a nice guy, and I like Laura too. I suppose meeting him is like... well, almost like having a younger brother. You know it was always hard for me, being the only one of my... kind."

"I remember when that cloned Superman turned up, you said something about Superman having a brother," Lois replied softly. "At the time I never realised... well, I guess I was so hung up on my own Superman fantasy that I never stopped to wonder what it was really like for him - you."

"Lonely, a lot of the time," Clark confessed. As Lois's arms tightened around him, he added quickly, "Oh, honey, I'm not lonely any more - you've taken care of that. I stopped searching for somewhere to belong the day I met you. But I guess, until the New Kryptonians came, I always wondered what it would be like to have other people around with the same abilities as myself."

"I guess meeting Zara, Trey and the others wasn't exactly the happy family reunion you'd hoped for," Lois observed dryly. "Especially not when they tried to execute - "

"Hush," Clark interrupted, kissing her for emphasis. "That's over, and we won't be seeing the New Kryptonians again. But you're right," he added. "It wasn't what I'd dreamed of, and like I told you once they'd gone, I finally realised where I belonged - with you. I don't

need anyone else, apart from you and our family." He smiled, love blazing in his gaze. "All the same, it is kind of nice getting to know Conor."

Lois understood, perhaps better than Clark realised. But she had her own yearnings for family, and she sighed involuntarily. "I know what you mean, Clark; I like Laura and Conor too. I just... I miss Jon."

"Me too." Clark sighed, and attempted to reassure both of them. "But he'll be fine with my parents, you know, even if HG Wells doesn't manage to return us at the same time as he took us away."

"You're right," Lois agreed. "I've just never been separated from him this long before, without even the chance to see him." Clark held her closer, trying to give her the support of his strength.

Lois pulled a little away from Clark, so that she could see his face, and changed the subject. "You say you see Conor kind of like a brother - but you didn't feel that way about the other Clark, did you?"

Clark bit his lip. "Well, that was different...." He sighed heavily. "I \*wanted\* to - but you know I was uncomfortable with the fact that he had you to himself for a couple of days when he first met you, and he was at our house with you. Don't get me wrong: I was grateful for what he did, and I told him so. But I could see in his eyes how he felt about you, and that made me a little jealous, even though I knew you weren't interested. Okay, I wasn't really surprised that he was in love with you. \*I\* am in love with you, after all, and he's me." He drew Lois closer to him again, resting his chin on top of her head. "He reminded me of me in the days when you just about accepted me as a friend but you'd never in a million years have thought of me as a boyfriend."

Lois reached up to kiss his jaw. "What can I say? I was stupid, so sue me..."

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Holding Conor's hand as they strolled together towards the entrance to the Solar Systems Studios and theme park, Laura kept a smile pinned on her face. Inwardly, however, she was more anxious than she had so far let Conor know.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" she enquired in a low murmur, not allowing her expression to alter from that of a blissfully happy TV star out for a day with her fiancé.

Conor squeezed her hand in response. "Sure. Clark and I went over all the possible angles earlier, and he thinks there's no problem. I know roughly what time he's going to get here, we decided where we should be, and I can contact him if it needs to be earlier or later than we thought."

"Contact him? How?" This time, Laura swung around to face Conor with a puzzled expression.

He gave her an awkward smile in response. "I didn't tell you this yet... well, I wasn't exactly sure you'd believe me, but Clark and I

can talk..." his voice lowered still further, "... telepathically."

"Wha - " Laura strangled her shocked response before any of the hundreds of other visitors and tourists milling around could hear. They wanted to be seen visiting the studios today, sure, but it was supposed to be a perfectly innocent day out. Knowing Conor could hear her, she whispered, "Telepathy? Is that because... basically you're the same person?"

Conor shook his head. "No - it's a Kryptonian thing, apparently," he murmured under the guise of kissing her.

He and Clark had practised their telepathic communication again that morning, during their lengthy discussion. He had heard their visitors moving around in the guest-room quite early, so he had left Laura in bed and hurried downstairs to make some coffee. Clark had joined him in the kitchen within about five minutes, fully dressed and shaved but not wearing glasses.

Conor had blinked and commented, "You really do look different without them."

Grinning and revealing a flash of brilliant white teeth, Clark had replied, "You shouldn't be surprised, surely? Not when you've played Superman on TV - you looked so different in the two roles that it was completely credible that people would be fooled."

"I guess," Conor had replied, but his thoughts were distracted as he had wondered again what Clark had actually thought of the videotapes. Clark had changed the subject by demanding some coffee and then suggesting that they went out into the garden.

It had been a long and very rewarding discussion, Conor now thought. Clark had been very reassuring, but also constructive in any criticisms he had made. It seemed that there were some things he had been doing as Superman which were perhaps ill-advised, or possibly dangerous; Clark had recommended some alternative methods of dealing with emergencies which Conor was now looking forward to trying out.

Following that conversation, Conor had suggested today's activity to Clark. To his surprise, Clark had been very receptive to the proposal, even though it meant leaving Lois alone at the house for a while. To have Conor Kane and Superman both seen in public in Beverly Hills at the one time was no bad thing, but to have a woman who looked as if she was Laura Lindsay's older sister around as well would be a mistake.

< < Clark? We're going into the park now>> Conor concentrated on Clark and tried to project his thoughts to him.

< < Okay. See you in about an hour>> came the swift reply. Conor frowned slightly in surprise; he hadn't simply detected Clark's words to him in that brief exchange, but also some sense of Clark's emotions. Whatever Clark and Lois were doing, Conor mused with a smile, they were having fun, relaxing, laughing.... Briefly, he was tempted to focus again to see what they were up to, but instantly told himself that such an act would be a gross invasion of privacy.

"So you said nothing's going to happen for about an hour?" Laura asked quietly, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yep, that's the plan," he agreed, focusing on his fiancée again.

"Well, in that case, let's enjoy ourselves," she urged. "We haven't had a whole lot of time for that lately, what with getting out of our Marners contracts, me moving into your place and your... new role." She glanced at the park map. "I want to go on the Lost Universe ride."

"Sure."

A park official recognised them then, despite the dark glasses and baseball caps both were wearing as protection against the strong sun, and waved them forward past the queues.

It was very important that Conor Kane should be seen *\*not\** to be Superman, Conor reflected again as he drew Laura with him through the crowds and into the park. Lois had reminded them of that again over brunch.

"It's even more important for you than it is for Clark," she had pointed out. "In our world, no-one really suspects that Superman could be anyone other than who he appears to be - no-one's seriously believed any rumours of a secret identity. But your world has seen a Superman on TV whose alter ego is Clark Kent. So... well, if I was a reporter here, the first story I'd be writing would be one asking whether *\*our\** Superman is someone in disguise."

Once on the Lost Universe ride they had a little more privacy as they were given a car to themselves, although other visitors to the park called and waved as their car passed; the news that Laura Lindsay and Conor Kane were in the park had rapidly spread. Keeping the professional smile on her face, Laura leaned towards Conor and murmured, "You really like Clark, don't you?"

Conor gave her a sheepish glance in response. "Does it really show that much? He's a great guy, and he's been really helpful about showing me how to do things. And he understood exactly how I felt this morning when I realised my powers were back." He draped his arm about Laura's shoulders, drawing her closer. "We're both from the same planet, and we both grew up not knowing why we were different - that's why it's so great being able to talk to him. I know we're the same person really, just from two different dimensions, but he told me this morning he thinks of me like a brother."

Laura smiled fondly; her fiancée was suffering from a major case of hero-worship. She just hoped he wouldn't miss his new-found 'brother' too much when Lois and Clark returned to their own world. Of course, she would miss Lois too; they had enjoyed another heart-to-heart over coffee while the men had been talking on their own. She had discovered, to her surprise, that she envied Lois and Clark their son; Laura had never imagined herself to be the maternal type, but somehow, hearing about young Jon Kent had created unexpected yearnings inside her. The discussion had reassured her about one thing, though: if Lois and Clark were able to have children together, then presumably she and Conor should be able to become parents too.

Walking together about the park a little later, the two actors were continually stopped by fans looking for autographs; since being visible was all part of the plan, Laura and Conor submitted to this with good grace. At one point, Conor's super-hearing cut in; there was a robbery with aggravated violence close to UCLA. For an instant he tensed, wondering how he could get away; then he realised that he couldn't possibly leave to be Superman at this point.

But... it *\*did\** present the perfect opportunity....

He concentrated on trying to reach Clark. < < I need you to deal with this for me>>

The response came swiftly. < < No problem. I'll come straight over there afterwards>>

Yet more 'proof' that Conor Kane and Superman had to be two different people, Conor thought, if Superman was handling an emergency on the other side of LA while Conor was seen by hundreds of people to be in the Solar System Studios.

Some time later, as Conor and Laura emerged from one of the exhibition areas, an air of excitement became apparent among the crowds of visitors. People were pointing and staring, and some young children were screaming and waving enthusiastically. A couple of bystanders recognised Conor, and called to him.

"Hey, it's Clark Kent! Your 'buddy' Superman's just over there!"

Conor looked in the direction the man was pointing, and there, indeed, was Superman, hovering over one of the soundstages and apparently just having completed some super-feat. He appeared to be about to fly off, but reluctantly floated to the ground in response to the urgings of the crowd, and allowed himself to be photographed. There was a sudden flurry of activity as a couple of studio employees emerged from the soundstage with a videocamera and microphone. Again with apparent reluctance, Superman posed for a few seconds in front of the camera.

"Hey, Conor! Laura! Come and pose with Superman!" someone standing close to the two actors yelled. The cry was taken up by several people until the cameraman noticed; he then began to gesture at Conor to come forward. Conor pulled a face and looked extremely loath to comply.

"Look, I'm not sure we want to do this," Laura explained to a couple of fans who were urging the two of them to come forward. "We used to be in a TV show about Superman, okay, but there's no reason to embarrass Superman."

Superman shrugged visibly. The crowd parted and Conor and Laura were waved forward; the three posed together for a few minutes, looking rather self-conscious, before Superman shook both actors by the hand and then took off.

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"Well, you should be safe now," Lois remarked later as the four gathered again at Conor's house. "I saw the whole thing on the TV news - the reporter was making it out to be something really exciting. Superman comes face to face with his TV \_alter ego\_ and is actually polite about it."

"What did they expect - that Superman would threaten Conor with a lawsuit for impersonating him?" Laura enquired sardonically.

Conor shrugged. "You've seen the speculation in the supermarket tabloids. It was all pretty pathetic."

"So was it convincing, Lois?" Clark asked. "I was hoping I hadn't overdone the embarrassed reluctance bit."

"You looked great," she assured him. "And something else - you and Conor looked so different standing together like that. I don't know what it is, because you do look like identical twins when you're both dressed as Superman or both not wearing glasses. But with you as Superman, Clark, and Conor with his hair flopping over his forehead and wearing sunglasses... nice touch taking off the baseball cap too, Conor.... Well, you looked like totally different people."

Conor smiled at Lois. "Great. And thanks for your help, Clark."

"No problem. If it helps...." Clark's expression altered then, becoming more businesslike. "Is there anything else you two would like to know, or need our help with? It just seems to me that Lois and I have done what we came here for, so it's possible that Wells could appear any time now to take us back."

Laura looked disappointed. "Aw, that's a shame. It's been so great having you two around, I was hoping you could stay a while longer."

Lois frowned thoughtfully. "Clark, sweetheart, don't you remember what HG said just before he left? He said there might be something else we'd have to do, and he looked pretty serious, as if he was warning us. Ummm... 'unforeseen dangers,' that was it."

"Yeah, I remember, but I wondered if he meant the Kryptonite in Smallville," Clark observed.

"Could be," Lois replied, sounding unconvinced.

"Wells said there would be some danger?" Laura asked curiously. "How would he know.... Stupid of me," she continued briskly. "He's a time traveller, of \*course\* he knows what's going to happen."

"But if he knows everything that's going to happen, why doesn't he prevent it?" Conor asked, puzzled. "Or at least tell us, so that we can?"

"It's not as simple as that, Conor," Clark explained. "For one thing, he isn't allowed to change the course of history in any irrevocable way - at least, he can't in our world. So he never tells us what's going to happen, in case our futures are affected. And also, the other big problem is Tempus. He travels around in time causing problems everywhere he goes - his one big aim is to prevent the foundation of Utopia, and he's decided that the way to do that is to

get rid of me, and possibly Lois as well. And Wells can't possibly know what Tempus is going to do next."

"I see," Conor replied slowly. "I sure hope this guy doesn't try to interfere over here."

Clark was silent, thinking that the chances of Tempus meddling in this world were now quite high. As long as Conor's powers were dormant and he knew nothing of his heritage, he represented no danger. But now, not only was he this world's Superman but he was also engaged to his world's Lois, without whom no Superman was complete. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps Tempus was the 'unforeseen danger' about which Wells had cautioned them. But surely not? he asked himself. Wells couldn't possibly \*know\* that Tempus was planning anything?

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"This has been fun!" Laura exclaimed some hours later as the four strolled together along a sandy beach. "It was a great idea to come here, Clark - thanks a lot for suggesting it."

They had flown together to a remote island in the Caribbean, to eat, swim and talk. It had provided an opportunity for all four to be out of doors together without having to worry about anyone recognising them, and it had been an incredibly relaxing experience. Clark had talked at length about his childhood in Smallville and his travels around the world before settling in Metropolis, and in return Conor and Laura had explained how they had found their big breaks in acting. It had been a great few hours, but now it was time to think about heading back to California.

"You know, we could ask Mr Wells if he would let us visit each other occasionally," Conor suggested. Lois and Clark's imminent return to their own world had been preying on his mind all day, and he was genuinely reluctant to say goodbye to their new friends. The parting would be bearable, however, if he thought there would be a chance that they could meet again.

Lois's mouth turned down at the corners. "Nice idea, Conor, but I doubt he'd agree. He doesn't seem to like us dimension-hopping, except when it's unavoidable. I dunno why - maybe it harms the fabric of space and time, or something."

Laura grimaced. "Oh, don't go all sci-fi on me, Lois! I really don't understand about all that stuff, I just accept that you're here and you're from another dimension."

"Well, I'm going to ask him anyway," Conor stated. "I guess you're right and he'll be here soon to take you back."

"You're quite right, Mr Kane," an unwelcome - at least, at that particular moment - voice said crisply from directly behind them. The four swung round, to be confronted with HG Wells and his interdimensional transport.

"You're taking us now - from here?" Lois enquired, surprised.

"Don't worry, honey; if we left anything at Conor's, I can get it and

be back in a few seconds," Clark commented quietly, at the same time catching Conor's eye. He noticed the regretful expression in his counterpart's face.

< < You'll do fine. You're already doing a great job>> he insisted urgently.

< < I wish you could stay>>

< < You know we can't. We'll miss you and Laura too>>

Lois touched her husband's arm, puzzled by the intent expression on his face. "Sweetheart? Mr Wells really needs us to get going."

"Okay." Clark switched his attention from Conor, adding, "Be back in less than a minute."

As Clark shot into the air, Laura approached Lois. "I'm going to miss you and Clark," she ventured softly.

Lois gave her a wry grin. "Me too." She turned to Wells. "I don't suppose there's any possibility...?"

"Oh no, Miss Lane, I couldn't possibly allow you and Mr Kent to visit Mr Kane and his fiancée again," the time-traveller insisted. "That could cause no end of problems."

"Well, it was worth a try," Laura murmured. She extended her arms to Lois, who reciprocated the hug warmly.

Conor then stepped forward. "Clark wouldn't mind, would he?" he enquired.

"Mind what?" Clark came to a stop in front of the little group.

"If I give Lois a hug to say goodbye."

Clark shrugged. "Not at all. In fact...." He strode to Laura, enfolding her in his arms with a bear-hug.

Lois, wrapped in Conor's arms, was momentarily conscious of a blinding flash, and in the next instant she realised that she was sitting in the interdimensional transport, which was now resting in the back yard of her home in Metropolis.

She turned to Clark, who was seated beside her. "Wow, that was \*quick\*! Clark - " She broke off suddenly, staring at her companion in horror. "You're not Clark!"

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As he began to release Laura in preparation for bidding farewell to Conor, Clark became conscious of a sixth person standing nearby. The man wore some kind of all-concealing cloak, and... there was something strange about him....

Clark couldn't figure out what it was which was making him uneasy, but he began to calculate how long it would take to pile Lois, Laura and Wells into the interdimensional transport so that he and Conor

could fly them back to California.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash of light. He saw Wells stagger backwards, as if he had been attacked. Laura fell to the ground, her hands covering her eyes. Conor, still holding onto Lois, seemed to go limp, but as Clark rushed to catch Lois the cloaked stranger was suddenly standing between them. As Conor fell to the ground, a seemingly-unconscious Lois was picked up by the stranger and placed in the transport. Clark tried to push the stranger out of the way, but to his amazement and disbelief, some sort of invisible force repulsed him once he was within about a foot of the cloaked man.

As the interdimensional transport disappeared, Clark heard a faint, but instantly recognisable, laugh so evil it chilled him to the bone.

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- 348 Hyperion Avenue, Metropolis -

"You're not Clark!"

"No, I'm not," Conor replied thickly, trying to figure out where he was and why his brain felt like it was stuffed with cotton wool. He felt completely disoriented; what had happened to make him feel as if he had fainted? He looked around him; the surroundings were completely unfamiliar. What was he doing there, sitting in the machine which only seconds earlier had been on the beach in the Caribbean? Where were Clark and HG Wells? And more important, \*where was Laura\*?

"Clark!" Lois wailed. "What happened? Why are \*you\* here instead of him, Conor?"

"Hey, I have absolutely no idea!" he retorted. "And I didn't ask to be here - I want to be with Laura. She just better be okay, or whoever's responsible for this will suffer... where \*is\* that miserable little writer?" He leapt out of the transport, searching the yard and the surrounding area with his super-vision, a murderous expression on his face.

"If you mean HG Wells, he wouldn't have done this deliberately," Lois snapped at him. "Someone else must have sent you here with me."

And done \*what\* with Clark? Lois asked herself in anguish, remembering involuntarily the time when Tempus had sent her husband into infinity. They had only just rescued him in time, then. She too climbed slowly out of the machine, then stared in horror as it shimmered and disappeared right before her eyes. She was at home in Metropolis, but Clark was... where?

Would she ever see Clark again?

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- An Alternate Universe -

Clark stared around him with dawning horror. Laura was groggily climbing to her knees in the sand. HG Wells lay face-down several feet away as water lapped over his body.

Lois, Conor, the mysterious stranger and the interdimensional transport were nowhere to be seen.

No, scrub that, he thought viciously; helplessly. That was no mysterious stranger. It was Tempus.

Tempus had taken Lois, God knew where. And he had also taken Conor, by the looks of it.

He was stranded here, in an alternate universe, without Lois.

And HG Wells, who had come to take Lois and himself back to Metropolis, who represented his only route back to Lois, was...

...dead?

- To Be Continued in Big Boys Do Fly III: Torn Between Two Worlds -

End  
file.